

PROMOTING THE ACQUISITION OF INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN ENGLISH THROUGH POP CULTURE

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Abstract: *Language and cultural abilities are at the forefront of our ever-shrinking world. Foreign language learning is composed of several components, or the defined “four language skills”, including grammatical competence, communicative competence, language proficiency, as well as a change in attitudes towards one’s own or another culture. For scholars and laymen alike, cultural competence, i.e., the knowledge of the conventions, customs, beliefs, and systems of meaning of another country, is indisputably an integral part of foreign language learning, and many teachers have seen it as their goal to incorporate the teaching of culture into the foreign language curriculum. (Byram, Morgan et al., 1994: 4) One of the misconceptions that have permeated through foreign language teaching is the conviction that language is merely a code and, once mastered—mainly by dint of steeping oneself into grammatical rules and some aspects of the social context in which it is embedded—‘one language is essentially (albeit not easily) translatable into another’ (Kramersch, 1993: 1). Culture in language learning is not an expendable fifth skill “tacked on” to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. It is always in the background, right from the beginning, ready to unsettle the good language learners when they expect it least, making evident the limitations of their hard-won communicative competence, challenging their ability to make sense of the world around them. (Kramersch, 1993: 1) It has so far become evident that the role of teaching culture in a foreign language setting/classroom has been a concern to teachers, curriculum designers and both scholars and publishers. Two main perspectives can be said to have been developing on the issue of teaching culture: transmission of the factual, cultural information, mainly consisting of statistical information, i.e. data about the target civilization,*

like literature, arts, habits, customs, history and everyday life. The other perspective is the embedded culture in an interpretive framework, which is drawing connections between one's culture and the target culture. The aim of this research is to show how culture is being integrated into the teaching curricula for students in elementary schools in Bitola, Republic of Macedonia. The students' books in question "Dream Team" serve as a point for research and an example where elements of culture, in this case pop culture, are being used for language learning. The finding will serve as a basis for improvement of the teaching curricula with the sole purpose of getting better results with students.

Keywords: *culture, language skills, teaching, textbooks, pop culture*

1. Introduction

Living in a time when everything is constantly changing, we as teachers must adapt and adopt new methods and teaching aids in the teaching curricula. Modernization of society leads to modernization of the educational process, which leads to the modernization of the content of the teaching curricula. The content in every subject has been "updated" or enlarged with material that would be more familiar and relatable to the students. Today, the makers of curricula include intercultural objectives and teachers are faced with the challenge of promoting the acquisition of intercultural competence through the teaching.

In the teaching literature of the subject of foreign language teaching, English in this case, intercultural experience tends to be an uncomfortable one, because it requires revision of beliefs, concepts and attitudes that students have taken for granted. Teaching culture includes changes in attitudes, beliefs, identity and values. It also requires students to revise their social identity, to reconsider the ideas they have held etc. Students may experience a wide range of feelings when confronted with a foreign language, let alone the culture that it contains it. The source for these feelings can be numerous such as: fear of encountering something new, excitement at discovery of new and different ways of thinking, relief through self-expression, anger that a deeply held belief may have been changed. They may experience a high level of what is called acculturative stress and experience feeling of marginality and alienation as well identity confusion.

But for a successful intercultural process in the classroom, teachers in general need additional knowledge, attitudes, competence, skills, good techniques, professionalism and of course a good source materials for

teaching culture. Another positive characteristic of teachers in this “environment” is that they should be skilful creators of the learning environment that will promote students’ acquisition of intercultural competence.

Today, the makers of curricula include intercultural objectives and teachers are faced with the challenge of promoting the acquisition of intercultural competence through the teaching. Foreign language education is by definition intercultural. Why? Because bringing English as a foreign language to the classroom means connecting students to a world that is culturally different from their own. The objective of language learning is no longer defined in terms of communicative competence in English (or any other foreign language). English teachers are now required to teach intercultural competence as well.

2. Textbooks and pop culture

In Macedonia, British dictionaries, as well as textbook, reading books, grammar books and teaching materials used in the English as a foreign language classes, are standard issue (most commonly *Longman* and *Oxford*), which are often written by British people, or by Macedonians schooled in the British fashion. Although we are seeing greater space in the textbooks being devoted to other varieties of the language – these activities are used as an example to show an individual with a British orientation encountering someone who is the *Other* in this culture-educational environment.

Pop culture in general is defined as the totality of ideas, perspectives, attitudes, memes, images and other phenomena that are deemed preferred for acquiring an informal consensus within the mainstream of a given culture (c. Wikipedia). Heavily influenced by mass media, this collection of ideas permeates the everyday lives of the society. Pop culture (popular culture) is often viewed as being trivial and “dumbed-down” in order to find consensual acceptance throughout the mainstream. As a result, it comes under heavy criticism from various scientific and non-mainstream sources (most notably religious groups and countercultural groups) which deem it superficial, consumerist, and sensationalist and corrupted.

The term “popular culture” itself is of 19th century coinage, in original usage referring to the “education and culture” of the lower classes. The term began to assume the meaning of a culture of the lower classes separate from the opposed to “true education” towards the end of the century. The current meaning of the term, culture for mass consumption, especially originating in the USA is established by the end of World War II. The abbreviated form “pop culture” dates back to the 1960s.

Textbooks that are used in the schools for students who learn EFL today, popular culture plays an important role in helping students to learn English more easily and more effectively. Pop music, films, television, TV soaps, magazines, internet etc. from English-speaking world are part of the everyday life in the most of non-speaking countries, partly as a part of the process of globalization partly because of the dominance of British or predominantly of American lifestyle.

The subject of interest of this paper is pop culture used as a tool for improving the communicative and intercultural competence of English for students who learn the English language as a foreign language. The “Dream Team” textbook series, which were chosen for this research, were chosen for the sake of the following reasons:

- They are widely used in Macedonian primary schools
- A great percentage of cultural topics covered in the textbooks
- Textbooks equally cover English and American culture
- Pop culture is used as a basis for language teaching
- Offers out of classroom projects about pop culture

3. Methodology

For the purpose of the research topic of this paper, an analysis has been made of the “Dream Team” book series being used in a primary school in Bitola, Macedonia.

“Dream Team” is a four part series designed to meet the needs of students continuing English as well as those starting English for the first time. The English level varies from beginner or elementary to pre-intermediate. The author of the series Norman Whitney describes “Dream Team” as a “communicative course that teaches students how to use language in real situations, while also paying careful attention to grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation”. Probably one segment that is crucial for our interest are stimulating and engaging topics, and an amusing and lively presentation story involving the activities of teenagers, appeal directly to the age group. The course also offers another interesting segment – a range of flexible options to help teachers meet the needs of their particular teaching situation. These include an optional introductory section, an optional final “Bonus unit” and optional projects and stories. Each textbook is divided into 6 units and each unit is divided into four segments: the first segment is presentation of dialogues and communication practice, the second segment is grammar and study skills, the third segment is dedicated to vocabulary and cultural studies and the fourth segment is dedicated to skills work and progress review through an ear-catching pop song. This paper will pay

attention to the third and fourth segment, although the first and the second segment also contain some materials about the pop culture in English-speaking countries.

4. Research and Analysis

4.1. Television

The Worldwide Popularity of TV ‘Soaps’ – this is one of the few topics about television in “Dream Team” series. The topic is organised into 4 sections. The first section encourages students to talk about their favourite soap, why they or why not like soaps. After that there is a text for reading. The text is divided into three parts. Each part is represented with a photo. Students after reading the text should choose the correct photo for each part. Then the third section covers some grammatical topics. Students have to find what pronouns refer to in the selected lines. The last section is dedicated to out of classroom activity where students are encourage writing a paragraph and making a speech about their favourite TV soap.

My Favourite TV Program – this topic is organised into 3 sections. The first section is a reading comprehension about a girl’s favourite TV program. After the reading, students have to complete the summary box about the basic facts of the girl’s favourite TV program: the name of the program, type of the program, location, main characters etc. Then the second section is a listening comprehension where students are listening conversation about types of programs on TV. They have to find out which TV program is favourite to whom. The last section requires students to write about their favourite TV program using the summary box in the first section as an example.

Television plays a (almost) central part in our lives these days. Why shouldn’t it play a larger part in the classroom, especially in foreign language instruction? Today’s learners need to be stimulated in ways that they can relate to. The television offers authentic English in settings that attract our learners' attention and can expose them to elements which we, as teachers, could not ordinarily do. For example, the learners can be exposed to a wide range of accents, not only the one which their teacher happens to have.

Another aspect is an interesting story line. The television entertainment industry spends billions of dollars on each program they produce in order to bring popular entertainment to the public. At their disposal, they have famous actors, expensive sets, and story lines which top writers have researched and found attractive to a viewing audience. Often, the popular programs try to make educational points as well, especially regarding morals that are valued in western society. Not to say that EVERY program that is produced is relevant or appropriate for the classroom, but why not take

advantage of those that are? Usually in English textbooks, television programs that are covered are cartoons, soaps and sitcoms. The texts and exercises connected with television in English speaking countries are usually placed in the *Cultural studies* section in the textbook. Students are encouraged to talk about their favourite TV program, why some like a particular show, why others don't like it. Some of the texts are closely connected with some grammatical category of words, some encourage students to write a short essay about their favourite TV program, or to make summary of the most important facts about their favourite TV show.

Usually these topics have an intercultural background. Although some television programs are watched around the world, some countries prefer different types of television programs. For example the topic about TV soaps opens the question about the general fact that most people enjoy watching soaps on television. But British people like different types of soaps than Americans or Macedonians. Probably a British family wouldn't enjoy in a Latin soap as much as Macedonian family would but we all enjoy soaps. This statement can raise different opinions among students and their view on the particular matter. From this we can move to another topic about all-time favourite sitcom. Talking about favourite sitcom can be more effective if the teacher can provide an episode from that particular show with subtitles so that they can discuss about that episode. For example in the textbook there's a short text about Gemma's favourite TV program "Friends" and why she is a dedicated follower of this US sitcom and why Jennifer Aniston is her favourite actress from the show. Here students can raise different opinions about the show and their favourite characters.

We also have to point it out that topics concerning television are few compared to the topics about pop music in this series of textbooks – usually 1 – 2 per textbook, excluding the last textbook "Dream Team 3" where there isn't any text concerning television.

Although today computers and internet are taking the central place in our homes, television is still powerful media, which has a strong impact on our lifestyle. Television as a part of the teaching EFL is helpful not only for intercultural understanding but also for improving the communication skills. Of course, teachers should be very careful when they choose the topic and TV shows that would be subject of interest during their English class.

4.2. Movie

Although the topics connected with movie and the movie industry are not greater in number than topics about television, it is obvious that pop music is the dominant pop culture aspect in the "Dream Team" textbook series. In general each textbook has 1 – 2 texts connected to movies in

English-speaking countries, again excluding the textbook “Dream Team” 3 where there isn’t any text about the film. Usually these texts are concerned with the history of the movie industry (“Hollywood” in the textbook “Dream Team” starter and “Cartoons and film animations” in “Dream Team” 1), going to the cinema and what teenagers want to watch (“Dream Team” 2), types of movies (“Dream Team” 1), discussing about student’s favourite movie, with a given example of composition why one discussion should look like and stating the reasons why a particular movie is student’s favourite (“Dream Team” 1).

Probably one of the best texts about film is the one in the textbook “Dream Team 1” where students are offered information about the history of making cartoons and how cartoons are made, as well giving them an information about the first cartoon. Since students enjoy watching cartoons and grew up watching cartoons they want to know more about the magic way how those moving pictures are created. They also learn some facts about history of cartoons (like who Walt Disney was or which was the first cartoon) but also they improve the competence of understanding English because the text is available on tape for listening, as well enriching their English vocabulary by completing the chart with information about what they heard before.

These texts are important for students because they enrich their vocabulary with some movie terminology, for example, what is a romantic movie, a science fiction movie, a war movie, a comedy movie or a cartoon, but also what kind of emotions and reactions these movies cause – a romantic movie can be really sad, a science fiction movie can be exciting, a comedy movie probably funny and some may find a war movie boring. Talking about movies can also be a useful tool for improving student’s competence about telling their personal opinion about why they like or dislike certain types of movies? Why they do not like certain movie, like “Titanic” for example? These types of texts have intercultural background as well. Students learn that what’s funny in the UK it might not be funny in Macedonia or in the USA. Just like some pop stars that are famous in the UK they are unknown in the USA and vice versa. **British humour** is a somewhat general term applied to certain comedic motifs that are often prevalent in comedic acts originating in the United Kingdom and its current or former colonies. Comedy acts and television programs typical of British humour include *Monty Python*, *Benny Hill*, and *Keeping Up Appearances* to name a few that have become quite popular outside of the United Kingdom. At times, however, such humour can seem puzzling to non-British speakers of English (for example, references to British slang terms or people who are not internationally known), while certain Commonwealth nations (such as Australia, Canada and South Africa) tend to find it more familiar. Many UK

comedy TV shows typical of British humour have been internationally popular, and have been a strong avenue for the export and representation of British culture to an international audience.

4.3. *Projects concerning pop culture*

The “Dream Team” textbook series, at the end of each textbook, offers projects section and extra units which cover cultural issues such as pop culture, food and drink, sports, holidays etc. It’s up to the teacher whether he or she will include these extra sections in the annual teaching curricula, but since are an integral part of the textbooks, they are covered in this paper as well.

Usually each textbook has six optional projects, each dedicated to different topic – “Our super group”, “Fantasy films”, “Hope Street – a soap opera”, “Our favourite pop stars” etc. Each project requires classroom and out-of-classroom activities. Classroom activities are usually connected with group work, building vocabulary and teacher’s help with students’ out-of-class activities which requires doing a little research about people and themes the particular project covers (for example, searching for information about the lives of their favourite pop stars as well as photographs from them). Students have to make poster presentations and after they have finished, they present the poster in the classroom.

Some other projects also require defining the aim of the poster, like the project “Fantasy Films” where the project itself gives freedom to students to decide what kind of film poster they will make – according to their own preference. Or when they work on a project like “Hope Street – a soap opera”, students have to write their own story for a single episode but also to draw pictures that illustrate the story. This again requires group work where every student can participate in making the poster, because not everyone is good in writing and drawing as well. Generally, these projects require active involvement of the teacher, as well as extra time spend on watching some films, music videos or an episode of an English-speaking soap with subtitles that can inspire students.

On the other side, there are three extra units in each textbook, but these extra units are not covered in this paper because there isn’t any pop culture topic covered in them. These units can be subject of interest to other researches concerning topics such as holidays, sports or multiculturalism employed in the teaching curricula for acquisition language and intercultural competence.

5. Discussion

Textbooks are an important factor in teaching English as a foreign language, and therefore embedding culture in these textbooks is an important factor whether students will acquire the English culture successfully as well as English language in general. In a previously conducted research on a similar topic³¹, two very distinct example books were given, where the presence of texts concerning culture was being questioned in relation to achieving better results with students. As a result from the research mentioned, it can be seen that the more present the culture texts and sections are in the books for foreign language learning, the bigger the understanding of the foreign language the students learn.

The “Dream Team” textbook series offer a wide range of texts and topics that cover British as well as American culture, especially texts that are connected to pop culture in English – speaking countries.

The most of the texts of pop culture are concerned with pop music, and even the revision segment of each unit is done through a pop song. This is a positive characteristic of these textbooks because the revision of the unit is interesting, fun and relaxing for the most of the students. This is not a usual way how a review of a unit usually functions in an ordinary classroom. The pop culture is part of the exercises and writing assignments as well in this series.

Texts about television and film are lesser in number than those about pop music but they are also equally fun and educational. “Dream Team 3” textbook doesn’t cover any topic concerning film or television, but pays more attention to American culture in general. Film industry is part of American culture and American lifestyle so therefore this aspect should be covered but probably the writer of the textbook decided that some other aspects of American culture should be covered.

Culture texts should be available at every level of language study, since culture texts are a very good way for students to enhance their vocabulary and to learn new information about a foreign culture. As it was stated earlier in this paper, language and culture go hand in hand. It is important to have culture texts in the textbooks in use. The newest trend that emerges today is multiculturalism, and by putting culture texts in the textbooks, students not only learn new vocabulary through the text, but they also learn about a new culture. Cultural content (since firstly creates the motivation to learn a foreign language), also indirectly promotes interlingual competence. Culture

³¹ *English across the curriculum*, Bisera Kostadinovska, paper, presented at the 6TH ELTAM International conference: Empowering Teachers for new challenges in ELT, 30th / 31st, Skopje, Macedonia, October 2010

text are necessary not only for learning about foreign culture and language, but also for making the class more fun, more relaxed and creating more relaxed atmosphere in the classroom.

English Textbooks used for the research

Dream Team Starter - Norman Whitney, Oxford University Press 2008

Dream Team 1 - Norman Whitney, Oxford University Press 2008

Dream Team 2 - Norman Whitney, Oxford University Press 2008

Dream Team 3 - Norman Whitney, Oxford University Press 2008

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